



Myerson, Joel, ed., *Whitman in His Own Time: a biographical chronicle of his life, drawn from recollections, memoirs, and interviews by friends and associates* [review]

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REVIEWS

JOEL MYERSON, ED. *Whitman in His Own Time*. Detroit: Omnigraphics, Inc., 1991. xviii + 348 pp.

Of the many interesting recollections, memoirs and interviews in Joel Myerson's excellent collection, one of the most fascinating is the piece by the Philadelphia doctor who attended Whitman during his final months. It contains a meticulously full account of the postmortem findings, reported in an extraordinary style that contrives to be at once dispassionately medical and breathless with adoration. In fact, the whole lengthy section is no more than an elaboration of the single sentence which prefaces it: "The wonder, that life had continued so long, grew as one by one of the revelations of the post-mortem examination were made." This modern autopsy was, in short, little different from the ancient divinatory practice of examining the runic innards of sacred animals. The doctors were clearly determined to find pathological proof of Whitman's superhuman character and sublime genius. Moved in this case even by a hapless corpse's plight, I'm reminded of the familiar poem by Dannie Abse (himself a physician) about a crude brain operation performed during the thirties and observed by his neurologist brother Wilfred. Failing to locate a tumor, the exasperated surgeon rummaged away in primitive fashion, only to be frozen in his tracks by a "voice so arctic" that emanated seemingly from the brain itself: "You sod, / leave my soul alone, leave my soul alone."

Is the soul of Whitman the poet indeed to be better detected, as the editor seems almost to argue in his introduction, in these frequently vivid first-hand accounts than in even the best of biographies? Fascinated though I am by Myerson's claim that he's providing each of his readers with the primary materials for a do-it-yourself biography—a wonderfully democratic, Whitmanesque redefinition of the genre—I'm unconvinced that in all these pages, thick as they are with riveting details of the man's daily doings and sayings, very much can, after all, be learnt about where the great poetry originated. For one thing, the bulk of the material relates to the long period of Whitman's physical and mental decline, so that we would do well to bear in mind the flat comment by Ellen M. Calder (Nelly O'Connor): "the Walt Whitman whom I knew so intimately in the sixties is not the man whom later comers are familiar with." (The alteration may, of course have been in part the result of the repeated strokes he suffered, since it is well known that such episodes can significantly modify a person's character, and may also affect his underlying temperament.) But even when, courtesy of Nelly and others, we are indeed allowed a glimpse of the earlier Whitman, the one who was more or less contemporary with the great poetry, the poet still recedes not only from our view but also, in a sense, from the sight of the man himself—witness his comment on the 1860 edition of *Leaves of Grass* as it came off the press: "I am astonished to find myself capable of feeling so much."

Of course, most of those who were friends, acquaintances, or only visitors during the later years were urgently determined to find a fit between the man and the poetry, a fit the old Walt was only too happy to provide at the expense of turning himself into a living parody of his own best work. The resulting descriptions varied in kind and in quality, from enchanting but ultimately insipid accounts of his kindness to children and animals to more arresting observations. More aware than most of the sensual bite of the poet's imagination in its prime, Helen E. Price recalled from the fifties an occasion when he was enthused, while walking through Brooklyn market, by "the beautiful combinations of color at the butchers's stalls," and particularly excited by the "beautiful shapes and delicate tints" of the fish. She also remembered his response when she and her brother set out to buy a parlor carpet: "What a good idea it would be to have the pattern of a carpet designed of leaves—nothing but leaves—all sizes, shapes, and colors, like the ground under the trees in autumn." There seems, at least, to be a totally unguarded spontaneity—and therefore an authenticity—in these remarks which is missing from the comments and gestures of the later period even at their most charming or disarming. When, for instance, Whitman spoils a photo for Jeannette L. Gilder by turning his head at the crucial moment to gaze out of the window and exclaim "The sun is coming out now," one suspects (perhaps unfairly) that he breaks out of one framed image only in order to compose himself for a more imposing picture.

"His poetry," Helen Price shrewdly surmised, "both was and was not part of himself," and Whitman admitted to Nelly O'Connor that very much of *Leaves of Grass* "was written under great pressure from within. He felt that he *must* do it." These perceptions by those who had known him in his prime are rarely matched by those who came upon him later, though Grace Gilchrist (Anne's daughter) does stumble, rather uncomprehendingly, upon an important truth when she records the aging man as saying "the finest teachers in life, the most artistic, are the darkest; it is necessary for an artist to see everything—to go to the depths of life." For the most part these recollections bathe Whitman in the most tranquil of light and turn him into that Santa Claus figure for whom he was actually mistaken by a Washington policeman one Christmas during the war. Believing him to be in masquerade, the policeman ordered him "to remove that 'false face,' his name for a mask. Walt quietly assured him that the only face he wore was his very own, but added, 'Do we not all wear false faces?'" Has anyone, I wonder, yet read Whitman and his poetry in the light of Melville's novel *The Confidence Man*?

Details from these accounts, some of them extremely familiar, seem nowadays positively to invite a modern deconstructive reading. That silver wolfskin covering the back of the aged Whitman's chair—creating, as one observer drily noticed, a beautifully nuanced, Whistleresque contrast, in tasteful pastel shades, between the whiteness of the beard and the fresh pinkness of the skin—may be taken as offering us a better image of the poet than the docile lamb-like character of the old man himself. And that enormous pile of paper with which he was notoriously surrounded demands, perhaps, to be "read" in the light of Poe's "The Purloined Letter": openness, as that story reminds us, can be the very best method of concealment. Any move to tidy up was greeted

by the poet with "amused alarm," Alma Calder Johnson recalled indulgently. Bearing in mind how Whitman described *Specimen Days*, the nearest he ever permitted himself to come to autobiography, as a "huddle" of notes, "incongruous and full of skips and jumps," "all bundled up and tied by a big string," it is tempting to see in that pile of paper (from which, by all accounts, he could always unerringly extract a required document with a single poke of his stick) an image of his own life as he preferred it to be seen. The materials could be arranged and rearranged in an infinite number of combinations, just as Whitman seemed to revel in multiplying images of himself through the plethora of photographs that were taken of him. He found safety in numbers, thereby turning a medium of representation that threatened to construct a seemingly definitive image, into one whose powers were only provisionally authoritative and partly impressionistic. It is therefore appropriate that Myerson's motley collection of memoirs should be handsomely illustrated with photographs spanning the greater part of Whitman's life.

Such reproachful sweetness and light seem to fill most of these accounts that they really would not seem out of place in the lives of the saints. But just as one begins to feel ashamed of one's own uncharitable skepticism, and to recall Iago's uncomfortable words—"he hath a daily beauty in his life / That makes me ugly"—enter a fellow spirit in the shape of William Roscoe Thayer. Although by no means immune, or unfair, to the old man's charm, Thayer remained unrepentantly of the opinion both that there was some humbug in him and that he had not been a contemporary of Barnum's for nothing. Always uncharacteristically ruffled and understandably wary in Thayer's searching presence, Whitman ultimately confided to him, shortly before his death, that for the first time he "had some doubt" whether his poems were going to last. Thayer was moved by "the pathos of that confession" by a man he regarded as "an arch-egoist, who honestly supposed that his personality was and would be immensely precious in human progress." But instead of rushing to reassure, Thayer—with a frankness at once admirable and appalling—"told him I believed that the genuine poetical parts of his works would long be read, although what he had written to support his theory of composition or to preach his gospel would probably be gradually forgotten."

If that comment of Thayer's is one of the most percipient and most prophetic in the whole volume, another of equal quality, addressed this time more directly to the poetry, was made by J. T. Trowbridge. "When Whitman's genius flows," he wrote, "his unhampered lines suit his purpose as no other form of verse could do. The thought is sometimes elusive, hiding in metaphor and suggestion, but the language is direct, idiomatic, swift, its torrent force and copiousness justifying his disregard of rhyme and metre; indeed, it has often a wild, swinging rhythm of its own. But when no longer impelled by the stress of meaning and emotion, it becomes strained and flavorless, and, at its worst, involved, parenthetical, enfeebled by weak inversion." Trowbridge had told Whitman as much to his face, in so many straightforward words, but the very same stubbornness that had once been the backbone of the poet's originality had by then turned into the prop of his conventionality.

Myerson is quite right to claim, in his introduction, that a collection such as this can serve many purposes and prove useful to several different kinds of

readers. A beginning student, over-inclined perhaps to respond to the yawp and gab of Whitman's poetry, might profitably note that he was for the most part a halting speaker who chose his words painstakingly, and that he left pieces of paper about the place on which he'd worked his way through a list of synonyms before finally deciding on the precise term needed. A specialist might usefully ponder the myth Whitman evolved towards the end of his life to explain his pitiful, paralyzed state. Perhaps, he suggested to his doctors, all his animal vitality had been channelled into mental activity, leaving his body unanimated and torpid. It is a theory which—as well as providing a sadly ironic postscript to "Song of Myself"—would seem to throw some light on both the thematic content and the structural patterning of the two late collections, "Sands at Seventy" and "Good-bye my Fancy."

Although "Whitman in His Own Time" could prove to be a slightly misleading title ("Whitman as Seen by His Contemporaries" would perhaps be more accurate, given that so many central aspects of the age scarcely get a look-in), this collection is a genuinely valuable one. For the first time in *our* time important and attractive primary sources for the study of Whitman's life are made easily available to student, specialist and general reader alike. At a juncture when the volume, not to mention the ingenuity, of critical commentary on Whitman is threatening to get out of hand, it is refreshing to be given a book that is plainly serviceable and indubitably worth the paper on which it's printed.

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BYRNE R. S. FONE. *Masculine Landscapes: Walt Whitman and the Homoerotic Text*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1992. xiv + 306 pp.

Byrne Fone recovers and reconstructs a remarkably compelling Whitman landscape. Utilizing the groundbreaking work of Robert K. Martin, Edward F. Grier, Betsy Erkkila, M. Jimmie Killingsworth, and Michael Moon, *Masculine Landscapes* offers the most extensive and convincing homoerotic readings yet offered of Whitman's early writings, his journals, and "Song of Myself."

Gay, lesbian or homosexual readings of Whitman's life and or poetry will always be as multitudinous as Whitman's vast cosmos. The diverse responses of John Addington Symonds, Edward Carpenter, Newton Arvin, Edward F. Grier, Robert K. Martin, myself, Michael Moon, and Byrne Fone have but one thing in common: the constant presence of homophobia—in our lives, in our employment, in our writings, and in the reception of our work. Homophobes would exterminate evidence of our own and of Whitman's homophilia just as they would exterminate our love. Justin Kaplan, Paul Zweig, Harold Bloom and others claim Whitman had little or no homosexual experience. Others who acknowledge such intercourse cannot accept it as human. In his *Manhood in the American Renaissance* (1989), David Leverenz confesses that Whitman's sexuality made him "as a heterosexual male, recoil" (p. 14).

Fone sets exact but not always observed limits for his "antihomophobic narrative": (1) to confine critical analysis to the earlier Whitman: "The letter Whitman wrote to Emerson and included with the poems of the second edition